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ABSTRACT

This study profiled phonological and morphosyntactic configurations of Appalachian English in the context of local and regional contact varieties, investigating the status of fronted /o/ and monopthong /ay for this variety and discussing such features as r-lessness, copula absence, plural -s absence on measure/count nouns, and a-prefixing. It investigated longitudinal variation and change in two Appalachian English-speaking communities located in Mercer and Monroe Counties (southeastern West Virginia). These two counties were the sites of one of the earliest sociolinguistic depictions of modern Appalachian speech. Data were extracted from interviews with 18 speakers (8 from a 1976 study and 10 from the current study). Participants varied in age and were lifelong residents of the counties. Results indicated that Mercer and Monroe County speech did not insulate itself from surrounding local and regional contact varieties. This variety seemed to be cultivating a few distinct variables within the context of the region. Results provided real time support for the apparent time construct and mapped the direction of language change away from Appalachian English toward a more localized variety. This suggests that Appalachian English may not be a discrete, broad ranging dialect anymore, but rather an amalgamation of regional varieties dependent on local community norms. (SM)

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# Doing Real Time:

# Chronicling Language Change in Appalachia

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**Doing Real Time: Chronicling Language Change in Appalachia**

**Introduction**

After almost four decades of detailed analysis and description of systematic language variation, sociolinguistic researchers have made significant progress in understanding the actuation, embedding and transition of language change. We have observed, for example, that many language innovations are initiated within particular social classes, that gender intersects with other variables in essential ways in the advancement of language change, and that social network structure and social identities constrain the rate and direction of changes in progress. As progressive and generalizable as these observations of changes in progress may be, however, they are predicated on theoretical assumptions about change over time. Though quite useful, these constructs, such as apparent time, inherently depend on assumptions about real-time to reinforce their validity. This paper intends to provide insight into the longitudinal variation and change of two Appalachian English-speaking communities located in Monroe and Mercer Counties in Southeast West Virginia. These two counties were the sites of one of the earliest sociolinguistic depictions of modern Appalachian speech, as the focus of a major description by Wolfram and Christian (1976). By returning to these same counties, this analysis examines the theoretical constructs of language change that have become the staple of sociolinguistic research. At the same time, this investigation of language variation within these Appalachian communities provides a basis for the re-examination of Appalachian identity. Since the original Wolfram and Christian (1976) analysis of language variation, little work has been conducted on regional identity as manifested in the Appalachian community.

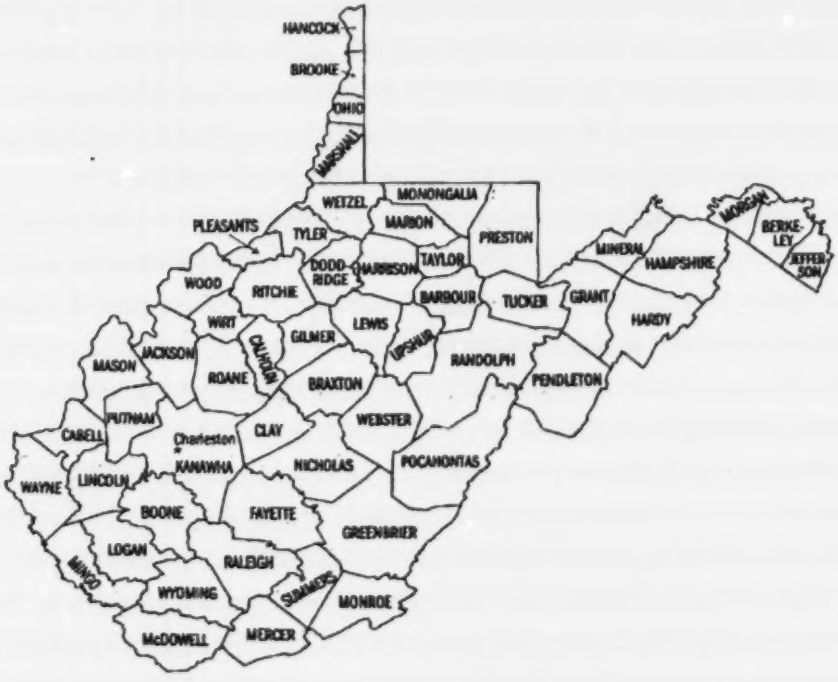
Based upon newly collected interviews with life-long residents of Mercer and Monroe counties in West Virginia, this paper will first profile the current phonological and morphosyntactic

configurations of Appalachian English in the context of local and regional contact varieties. Next, this paper will investigate the status of fronted /o/ and monopthong /ay for this variety. Other features, such as *r*-lessness, copula absence, plural *–s* absence on measure/count nouns, and *a*-prefixing will be discussed. As will be shown, such qualitative and quantitative analysis lends crucial supportive data to theoretical assumptions about language change, as well as lends insight into the changing identity of Appalachian English speakers in Mercer and Monroe Counties.

**Sociocultural Background**

Mercer and Monroe Counties are located in the southeastern corner of West Virginia bordering southwest Virginia. A map of these counties is provided for you below in (1).

**(1) Map of Mercer and Monroe Counties, West Virginia**



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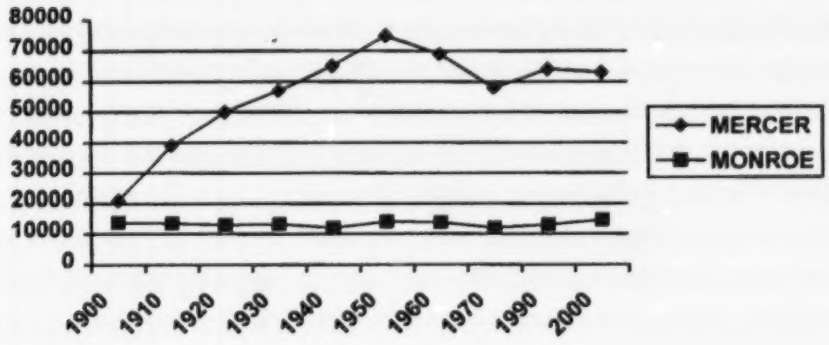
Economically, Mercer and Monroe counties have been historically distinct. Mercer County was incorporated in 1837 after the discovery of coal in the area, and until the 1950's when the coal declined, coal mining was the county's primary occupation. Today, the economy is based on timber logging and local business, although coal mining has not entirely disappeared from the region. Miners now simply commute to adjacent McDowell County, West Virginia, to strip mine instead of mining directly in Mercer County itself.

Monroe County, on the other hand, was founded earlier than Mercer in 1799 and has continued to subsist on an agricultural economy. The county has no urban centers unlike Mercer County, which is more urban than rural. Interstate 77 and US 460 are heavily traveled thoroughfares in West Virginia and cut directly through Mercer County's urban centers, Princeton and Bluefield. Neither county is economically impoverished in the context of its region. Mean income in the area is within $1000 of the West Virginia average.

Until 1950, Mercer County's population grew steadily as the coal industry continued to grow; however, with a decline in the coal came a decline in the population, although the number of inhabitants has remained fairly steady at around 60,000 for the last two decades. At the same time that Mercer County's population has had dramatic fluctuations, Monroe's has stayed constant at around 14,000 since 1900. Number (2) below graphs the population distribution for the two counties since 1900.

**(2) Population Rates of Mercer and Monroe Counties Since 1900**




Both Mercer and Monroe Counties are primarily composed of Anglo-Americans, though there is a small community of African Americans in both counties. In total, 93% of the population in the counties is Anglo American and African Americans round out the remainder of the population.

**Methodology**

In the 1976 Wolfram and Christian study, over 129 interviews of Anglo-American lifelong residents of the counties were conducted by fieldworkers local to the area. Up to this point in the current study of the area, over 60 conversational interviews with Anglo-American lifelong area residents have been collected.

For the purposes of this paper, data was extracted from 18 speakers, 8 from the Wolfram and Christian study and 10 from the current study, which I will henceforth refer to as the 1976 and 2000 studies, respectively. To ensure the most reliable comparison between the two data sets, I selected from the 1976 collection those interviews where the participants were from towns, communities, or cities where I had collected my interviews so far. In the 1976 dataset collected for this paper, speakers range in age from 11 to 50 and have been divided into two age groups: young, those speakers 11 to 29 and middle, those speakers 30-50. In the 2000 dataset, tokens have been collected from three different age groups: young, those speakers 11-29, middle, those speakers 30-

50, and old, those speakers 51 and older. Young speakers are included in the 2000 dataset to illustrate the direction of change in this Appalachian English variety. The young and the middle age groups in the 1976 study are respective birth cohorts of the middle and old age groups in the 2000 study. Participants in both the 1976 and 2000 interviews are lifelong residents of the counties. And, all of the birth cohorts in the datasets have similar economic backgrounds—working class to lower middle class. The young speakers in the 2000 dataset are all college educated and range in social class from lower middle to upper middle class.

**Qualitative Description**

The tables in (3) and (4) on your handout sketch out the phonological and morphosyntactic configurations for Mercer and Monroe County Appalachian English in the context of local and regional varieties. For reference, an inventory of the 1976 version of the area's phonological and morphosyntactic profile is also offered. A check in each box indicates that the feature is widely used in the area. A check in parenthesis indicates marginal use of the feature and a check minus indicates that the feature has not been observed in the region at all.

Most of the phonological and morphosyntactic features listed in the inventories on your handout are well documented in Appalachian English language description. Typical phonological features that have been discussed include intrusive *t* and initial *w* loss, and as you can see in the inventory in (3), Mercer and Monroe County speakers today do exhibit some use of these typical forms, although a few features, such as *h* retention, for example, appear to be moribund. Most of the morphosyntactic features, such as multiple negation and subject-verb concord, are still widely in use in the area as the inventory in (4) illustrates. However, other morphosyntactic features, such as the use of irregular pronouns and *–ly* absence on adverbs, have certainly declined.

In addition to the traditional profiles of Appalachian English, some new forms in the context of the counties are in use. One such phonological form, for example, is the use of a voiced or non-

voiced velar stop in the place nasals */n/* or engma in an *–ing* sequence. So, we might hear a word like *somethink* for *something* or *sing-gink* for *singing*. This form has been observed in the region and other areas in the South and does not appear to be unique to the Mercer and Monroe County area, indicating that these counties are not insular but do have connections that extend beyond the immediate area. At the same time, however, another phonological form does appear to be distinctive in the context of Mercer and Monroe County. That is the very marginal use of /oi/ for /ay/ as in [roit]. This form is more commonly found along the coastal regions of Virginia and North Carolina, for example, but may be a unique manifestation of /ay/ in the direct area of the counties.

Distinct morphosyntactic features have been observed in the counties as well. For example, article deletion for Mercer and Monroe County speakers seems to be widespread. To my knowledge, this feature is not typically associated with Appalachian English although its use has been documented among Appalachian English speakers in Northern West Virginia, participating in the West Virginia Dialect Project. Indeed, use of this feature in Mercer and Monroe Counties does appear to be distinct within the context of local varieties. Qualitatively, then, Mercer and Monroe County speech appears to have features in common with traditional varieties of Appalachian English and it shares a few features with local and regional contact varieties as well. At the same time that Mercer and Monroe Counties share features with surrounding varieties, however, the counties are also showing some distinctiveness in the context of their immediate area.

**(3) Phonological Configuration of Mercer and Monroe Counties, West Virginia, 2000**

| PHONOLOGICAL FEATURE | MERCER AND MONROE 1974 | MERCER AND MONROE 2000 | SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA 2000 | NORTHERN WEST VIRGINIA 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Consonant cluster reduction<br>*wes' for west* | (✓) | (✓) | (✓) | ✓ |
| [Iz] plural following consonant clusters<br>*deskes, roastes* | ✓ | ✓- | ✓ | ✓- |
| Intrusive *t*<br>*oncet* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Copula (Is/Are) Absence<br>*You ___ crazy* | (✓) | (✓) | ✓ | (✓) |
| *R*-lessness<br>*mothuh* for *mother* | (✓) | ✓- | (✓) | ✓- |
| Unstressed syllable deletion<br>*'mater* for *tomato* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Initial *w* loss<br>*Young'uns* for *young ones* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| *H*-retention<br>*Hit* for *it* | ✓ | (✓) | ✓- | ✓- |
| */n/* for */ŋ/*<br>*somethin'* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| +/- voiced velar for */n/* or */ŋ/*<br>*something-gelse*<br>*somethink* | ✓- | (✓) | (✓) | ✓- |
| Glide reduction<br>*taam* for *time* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| [oi] for [ay]<br>*toim* for *time* | ✓- | (✓) | ✓- | ✓- |
| Fronted */o/* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| */r/* intrusion<br>*worsh* for *wash* | ✓ | ✓- | ✓- | ✓ |
| *re* metathesis<br>*hunderd for hundred* | (✓) | ✓ | (✓) | ✓ |
| */ə·/* for /ow/<br>*feller* for fellow | ✓ | (✓) | (✓) | ✓ |
| */i/* for */ə/*<br>*Californee* for *California* | ✓ | ✓ | (✓) | (✓) |
| Final stop devoicing<br>*helt* for *held* | (✓) | (✓) | ✓- | ✓- |
| Initial */th/* loss<br>*Put 'em a dog up 'er* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| */d/* for initial */th/*<br>*dere for there* | (✓) | ✓ | (✓) | ✓ |
| Lowered *ire* sequences<br>*tar* for *tire* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

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**(4) Morphosyntactic Configuration of Mercer and Monroe Counties, West Virginia, 2000**

| GRAMMATICAL FEATURE | MERCER AND MONROE 1974 | MERCER AND MONROE 2000 | SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA 2000 | NORTHERN WEST VIRGINIA 2000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *A*-prefixing<br>*a-hunting* | ✓ | (✓) | ✓- | (✓) |
| Subject/Verb Concord<br>*Some people likes 'maters* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | (✓) |
| Irregular Verbs<br>*We throwed them a birthday party* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Perfective *Done*<br>*I done forgot* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Double Modals<br>*I might could do it.* | ✓ | ✓ | (✓) | (✓) |
| Intensifiers<br>*You're right smart* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| *-ly* absence<br>*I come from Virginia original* | ✓ | ✓- | ✓- | ✓ |
| Positive *anymore*<br>*Anymore, I like to watch movies* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓- | ✓ |
| Multiple negation<br>*Nobody seen nothing* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Auxiliary contraction and negator<br>*I've not* for *I haven't* | (✓) | ✓ | (✓) | ✓ |
| Plural Count Noun *–s* absence<br>*ten mile__* | ✓ | (✓) | (✓) | ✓ |
| *Fixin' to*<br>*I'm fixin' to do it directly.* | ✓- | ✓- | (✓) | (✓) |
| Article deletion<br>*I work at hospital* | (✓) | ✓ | ✓- | ✓ |
| Article insertion<br>*I ' m heading to the Walmart* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Object for subject pronouns<br>*Me and him went to the store* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Object pronouns as demonstrative<br>*Them movies is scary* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Personal datives<br>*He got him a scar* | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓- |
| Irregular Prepositions<br>*He wakes up of the morning* | ✓ | (✓) | ✓- | (✓) |

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**Quantitative Description**

Shifting now to a quantitative look at Appalachian English as manifested in Mercer and Monroe Counties. Tokens were extracted from the 1976 and 2000 datasets for fronted /o/ and monopthong /ay/, in order to assess the degree to which language has changed in the last two and a half decades of real time. Such analysis, too, lends supportive data to theoretical assumptions about language change over time, such as the apparent time hypothesis.

The tables in numbers (5)a and (5)b on your handout illustrates the distribution of */o/* for the 1976 young and middle-aged speakers and the 2000 old middle and young speakers, respectively.

**(5)a Distribution of */o/* for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 1976**

| | Fronted Nucleus | | Fronted Nucleus and Glide | | Backed Nucleus | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Age Groups* | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N |
| Young | 38 | 53 | 31 | 44 | 3 | 4 | 29 | 39 |
| Middle | 33 | 55 | 39 | 65 | 5 | 3 | 23 | 39 |

**(5)b Distribution of */o/* for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 2000**

| | Fronted Nucleus | | Fronted Nucleus and Glide | | Backed Nucleus | | Other | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Age Groups* | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N |
| Young | 48 | 28 | 24 | 14 | 10 | 6 | 17 | 10 |
| Middle | 68 | 28 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 15 | 6 |
| Old | 70 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 30 | 9 |

/o/ is a diagnostic variable in the Southern Vowel shift, with the nucleus moving front as the shift progresses. As the numbers in (5)a illustrate, the young and middle-aged speakers in the 1976 dataset show negligible difference with respect to fronted /o/, although both groups have higher incidence of the fronted variants as opposed the backed version of /o/. For the 2000 speakers, though, the old age group has the highest frequency of fronted /o/ at 70%, with the young speakers showing the least incidence of the variant at 48%. This distribution is a bit unexpected: old speakers should have more incidence of the backed variant than the fronted, and young speakers should have a higher incidence of fronted /o/ than the older generations. These numbers are likely due to an interactive effect, where the glide on /o/ may be more fronted than the nucleus and is retracting from the older to younger generations, giving the impression that /o/ is more front in the old age group.

With respect to the real-time change for /o/ fronting, I compared the young and middle aged 1976 speakers with the middle and old aged 2000 groups respectively with T Tests to determine whether there was a significant difference between each group of birth cohorts. A T Test is a non-parametric test designed to determine whether two samples are likely to have come from the same two underlying populations that have the same mean. The p-level reported with a T TEST represents the probability of error in accepting the research hypothesis about the existence of a difference. A p value less than .05 indicates that there is a difference between the two groups that are tested. For the young 1976 and middle 2000 birth cohorts the p value is .1618 and for the middle 1976 and young 2000 birth cohorts the p value is .0983. Both p values indicate that there is no difference for either pair of birth cohorts with respect to fronted /o/. These values lend support to the apparent time hypothesis, which by claiming that generational differences among a particular group of speakers represents stages of language change at different points in time, underlying

assumes that there is no significant difference in a group's speech as the group moves from generation to generation.

With respect to monopthong */ay/*, the distribution for the counties is given in (6)a and b on your handout.

**(6)a Distribution of */ay/* for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 1976**

| | _# | | _C[+Voice] | | _C[-Voice] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Age Groups*** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **TOTAL N** |
| **Young** | **93** | **14** | **96** | **72** | **44** | **29** | **115** |
| **Middle** | **100** | **21** | **95** | **76** | **85** | **33** | **130** |

**(6)b Distribution of */ay/* for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 2000**

| | _# | | _C[+Voice] | | _C[-Voice] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Age Groups*** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **TOTAL N** |
| **Young** | **66** | **2** | **77** | **34** | **67** | **18** | **54** |
| **Middle** | **100** | **8** | **94** | **66** | **53** | **24** | **98** |
| **Old** | **100** | **8** | **80** | **32** | **50** | **18** | **58** |

Use of monopthong */ay/* has long been indicative of Southern speech and is very sensitive to its environment. */ay/* is most likely to be monopthong word-finally than when it occurs before a voiced consonant., and */ay/* is least likely to be monopthong when it precedes a voiceless consonant. As both the tables indicate the incidence of monopthong */ay/* is quite high across age groups and

environments. However, in (6)b the hierarchy of constraints for */ay/* appears to be less restrictive from the old age group to the young, underscoring the widespread, growing use of the feature irrespective of linguistic environment.

To take a closer look at the variable's distribution over real time, I used an Analysis of Variance test or ANOVA, which is essentially an extension of a T Test designed to determine whether means from two or more different samples of data are equal—that is, drawn from populations with the same mean. However, the ANOVA test showed a marked difference in the standard deviations, rendering the test invalid. Instead, T Tests were applied to the data regardless of environment. For the young 1976 and middle 2000 birth cohorts the p value is .5654 and the p value for the middle 1976 and the old 2000 cohorts is .2949. Both indicate that there again is no difference between cohorts in real time.

Among the other features tabbed for this study, *r*-lessness is categorical for each group, and this result is not all surprising given the overall history for *r*-fullness in the Appalachian region. Copula absence, too, as is shown in (7) on your handout is negligible. Of the tokens counted, all except three instances reflect copula absence with *are* and the three with *is* are in questionable environments—that is, preceding a sibilant as in *It is so nice*, for example. Displayed in the tables are only those tokens of copula absence with *are*.

**(7)a Distribution of Copula Absence for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 1976**

| *Age Groups* | % | N |
|---|---|---|
| **Young** | **2** | **1** |
| **Middle** | **6** | **2** |

**(7)b Distribution of Copula Absence for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 2000**

| *Age Groups* | % | N |
|---|---|---|
| Young | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 20 | 8 |
| Old | 8 | 3 |

For the 1976 group, the copula is absent less than 10% of the time for either age, and the highest percentage for copula absence in the 2000 dataset is 20%, which is contributed solely by one speaker. Like r-lessness , low copula absence is also not unexpected given that copula absence is typically related to *r*-lessness, at least for Anglo-American speakers. That is, the copula *are* might be subject to deletion in *r*-less dialects, where *r* is deleted on purely phonological grounds.

With respect to plural *–s* absence on measure and count nouns, the chart in (8)a and b outlines the frequency for the groups.

**(8)a Distribution of Plural *–S* Absence on Measure/Count Nouns for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 1976**

| *Age Groups* | % | N |
|---|---|---|
| Young | 20 | 1 |
| Middle | 52 | 13 |

**(8)b Distribution of Plural –*S* Absence on Measure/Count Nouns for Mercer and Monroe County, WV, 1976**

| *Age Groups* | % | N |
|---|---|---|
| Young | 0 | 0 |
| Middle | 9 | 1 |
| Old | 11 | 1 |

The N's for the 1976 group is higher than those of the 2000 set indicating that this feature may be moribund. This is reinforced by the complete absence of this feature in the young 2000 age group.

Like plural –s absence, a-prefixing also has low N's. However, in the groups sampled, a-prefix is more prevalent in the 2000 dataset with 9 cases versus two incidences in the 1976 group. This is certainly unexpected given the observations that the *a*-prefix is moribund. However, the higher numbers of *a*-prefix in the 2000 group may be a byproduct of more narrative contexts that are more receptive the *a*- prefix. That is, in the 1976 interviews, there were fewer discourse opportunities conducive to the feature. This is certainly an issue that servers further examination.

**Conclusions**

Mercer and Monroe County Appalachian English gives sociolinguists a rare look at language change in real time. By looking qualitatively at this variety, we have seen that Mercer and Monroe County speech does not insulate itself from surrounding local and regional contact varieties. At the same time, this variety does seem to be cultivating a few distinct variables within the context of the region. A look at the quantitative landscape of this variety, specifically examining variables such as /o/ and /ay/ for both the 1976 and 2000 birth cohorts as well as looking

at a variety of other features, has given real time support for the apparent time construct as well as mapped the direction of language change away from Appalachian English perhaps towards a more localized variety.

Indeed, examination of the data presented here indicates that Appalachian English may not be a discrete, broad ranging dialect anymore (if it arguably was in the first place) but rather an amalgamation of regional varieties dependent on local community norms. Thus, Monroe and Mercer County Appalachian English speakers may be moving away from the widespread Appalachian dialect in favor of more widely accepted norms.

Part of this movement may be a conscious effort to disassociate themselves a highly stigmatized group language, as Appalachian English has often been characterized in the media as a substandard variety that evokes negative and/or ignorant stereotypes. However, this movement may also be directly related to the expanded contact of the counties with other regional varieties over the last 25 years, quite typical of the fate for other previously insular regional varieties. Answering these and other questions, such the status of African-Americans with respect to this variety of English and how language changed in real time over the lifetimes of the 1976 speakers, will lend further insight into the changing landscape of Appalachian English.

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